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AUTHOR Chambers, Francine
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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the error analysis thought processes of foreign language learners regarding their written examples of the language under study, suggesting that consciousness plays a part in instructed second language acquisition. The study assumed that individual learners could offer insights into interim states of their developing grammar by commenting on their second language written productions. Data was gathered from one-on-one interviews with students, aged 15 years, who had been learning French for 4 years. Mistakes that were discussed with each student were taken from their own written compositions of approximately 120 words, which described a set of pictures that narrated a story. Core interview mistakes under discussion included use of verb tense, direct versus indirect pronoun, and the apostrophe; actual examples from the written exercise illustrate these "typical" mistakes. Insights gained from this study reveal that students have different reasoning from teachers about mistakes and how difficult it is for the teacher or researcher, who knows the language well, to see that language through the eyes of the learner. The study also revealed that the views of the learner can provide useful insights into language and learning. (Contains 22 references.) (NAV)

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LEARNERS' ACCOUNTS OF THEIR ERRORS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Francine Chambers

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LEARNERS' ACCOUNTS OF THEIR ERRORS IN A FOREIGN LANGUAGE: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY

Francine Chambers

Finding out some of the processes by which learners produce utterances in a foreign language is no easy task. From the product (learner language) we have to speculate on the processes which remain hidden. Errors in particular have been the focus of much study especially in the last thirty years. However the nature of an error is problematic for the teacher and the researcher who have no access to the learner's processes; another major difficulty is the criteria chosen for describing errors. Learner language, in between the first and the second language, can be seen from different perspectives: for example, errors can be described in grammatical terms with reference to the assumed L2 form targeted and the influence of L1 or they can be described from a developmental perspective focusing on the learning progression. The difficult task is to differentiate between the description of the error and the interpretation and explanation of the process by which it was produced and at the same time to keep in mind that a description, free from interpretation, may be unattainable.

Studies dealing with error classification are a good example of the problem since it is reported that a large number of errors do not easily fit the *a priori* classification based on the target language. Early attempts at error classification showed that a considerable number of errors could not be classified at all. In a study analyzing the errors made by 50 Czech students writing free essays in English, Duskova (1969) claims that nearly 25% of all the errors collected could not be categorised, "being unique in character, nonrecurrent and not readily traceable to their sources" (1969:15). The doubt which hangs over the nature of each error limits the generalisations which can be made from quantitative studies such as error counts and classification of errors.

In the 1960s, contrastive analysis was carried out between L1 and L2 on the assumption that differences between the two language systems were a major source of errors. However, researchers began to realise that many errors could not be attributed to the contrasts between two language systems and that teaching targeted on these contrasts did not prevent learners from making

mistakes. There is little agreement as to the proportion of errors which can be attributed to language transfer from L1. A survey of 8 experimental studies reported by Ellis (1985:29) shows that the percentage of errors deemed to be due to L1 interference could vary from 3% (Dulay & Burt, 1973) to 50% (Tran-Chi-Chau, 1974; Lott, 1983), with 3 studies reporting a figure between 30 and 33%. Ellis also points out that some errors attributed to language transfer could be developmental errors; researchers can be influenced by the theory of second language acquisition in which they are most interested. However, progress has been made by moving beyond the question as to how often transfer from L1 to l2 occurs towards a recognition of cross-linguistic influences (CLI) of many kinds. Kellerman & Sharwood-Smith (1986), who coined the phrase, consider it as :

> theory-neutral, allowing one to subsume under one heading such phenomena as 'transfer', 'interference', 'avoidance', 'borrowing' and L2-related aspects of language loss and thus permitting discussion of the similarities and differences between these phenomena. (1986:1)

Moving away from errors as products to errors as potential evidence of processes leads us to acknowledge the contribution which each learner can make to our understanding of their learning and their processes. I fully endorse Kohn's position concerning the importance of individual studies of learners:

> For my analysis of interlanguage processes ... it is of vital importance to detect and understand just the idiosyncratic form which knowledge assumes in the mind of the individual learner.... Researchers should feel encouraged to seriously probe the possibilities of approaching the learner' s 'real' knowledge as a necessary step in their attempt to understand how he builds it up and makes use of it in his interlanguage activities. (1986:24)

The study presented here assumed that individual learners could offer some insights into interim states of their developing grammar by commenting on their L2 written production.

In the instance of errors for which teachers have no immediate explanation, it is clear that the learner's processes are unknown to us; this is less obvious when we believe that we know what happened only to find that our preconceptions were inappropriate. This can only be demonstrated through an encounter with the learner.

Data collection

Obtaining information from learners themselves concerning the language they have produced adds another dimension to the task of describing the error; this information was gathered in the course of interviews with several learners, who were asked to comment on specific errors.

Learners' retrospective reports have been used to enquire into second language learning strategies, often through interviews dealing in general with views, beliefs and opinions about language learning rather than with a specific task (Bialystock, 1983b; O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), but instances of learners' reports on specific features of the language they have produced themselves have rarely been reported in the second language literature. In such studies the report can be either introspective, when the information is still available in short-term memory, or retrospective. The ways of eliciting the data vary; the researcher may elicit data orally or by means of written instructions. The responses can be audio-recorded or in writing. Great care has to be taken of the interviewer's intervention, which could alter, distort or falsify what the learner is reporting. Intervention from the investigator has to be minimal. Oral interviews have the advantage over other methods of being more flexible, giving the researcher the opportunity of adapting to the learner's particular response and allowing more in-depth probing.

Through this method of collecting data, we can access only part of the process, that which makes use of the conscious knowledge, what Bialystock defines as "explicit knowledge" (1978, 1983a) or "knowledge about language", i.e "an explicit, conscious and articulated understanding of language" (Mitchell, Brumfit & Hooper, 1993). The major objection to the value of such data is based on the assumption that much of language learning takes place at an unconscious level and is therefore inaccessible (Seliger, 1983). However, in defence of verbal report data, Cohen (1984) pointed out that:

> it has become apparent that it is difficult, if not impossible, to obtain accurate insights about learners' conscious thought processes through conventional observations of teacher-centred classroom sessions. By 'conscious thought processes' what is meant are all thoughts that are within the realm of awareness of the learner, whether they are attended fully or not. (1984:101)

After discussing the main criticisms made by Seliger, Cohen concluded that "Seliger's attack was too strong" although he accepted that caution must be used in the collection of the data. Learners' retrospective accounts of their mistakes must provide some information about the current understanding of a learner but we cannot be sure that this was precisely the knowledge which was drawn upon at the time of production. However, it is still the case that the learner's comments have to be part of their knowledge about language; pure invention on the learner's part seems rather unlikely. In the context of instructed second language learning, where interaction between teacher and learner takes place, often through the means of verbal explanation, this kind of data can first of all provide some feedback on the nature of the pupil's intake from the explicit class teaching about language. In studies of instructed second language acquisition, then, learners' accounts of what they have understood cannot be realistically considered an irrelevance.

The question regarding the acceptability (or otherwise) of verbal report data is linked to an issue which divides researchers in second language acquisition into two camps, namely whether consciousness has a role to play in second language learning or not. Schmidt (1990), after summarizing recent psychological research and theory on the topic of consciousness, highlights the differences between current mainstream cognitive psychology, which "frequently claims that learning without awareness is impossible", and a fairly dominant group in second language acquisition influenced by Chomsky, for whom

> it is virtually an article of faith that what is acquired in an implicit (i.e.unconscious) mental grammar is most clearly reflected in learner intuitions about sentences, less directly in learner performance, and least directly in learners' conscious beliefs and statements about their use of the language. (Schmidt, 1990:130)

The study presented here obviously rests on a belief that consciousness plays a part in instructed second language acquisition. Much more research into what learners are conscious of as they learn a second language has to be done; the research methods have to be appropriate and it seems doubtful that one can presume to have access to learners' perceptions of the world without the learners' participation.

Interviews with pupils

The design of the investigation had to satisfy the teacher that the process in itself could also be of use to the learners; providing time for individual sessions with a teacher was considered as such, in a school context where normally one-to-one exchanges in class take place under pressing time constraints and the requirement of responding to group demands. So the interviews were both an appropriate way of conducting remedial sessions with the pupils and a way of researching into foreign-language learning in a school environment.

The one-to-one sessions took place after school and lasted up to 45 minutes; the time depended entirely on the pupil's response and was completely unpredictable. The pupils who took part were in the top set of Year 10 (age 15). They had been learning French for four years. Oral interviews were chosen as the most flexible method of collecting data and the teacher-interviewer had to adopt as non-intervening a role as possible so that her preconceived interpretation of the mistake, when there was one, would not impinge on the account given by the pupil. The interviews were held several days after the piece of writing was done. Some interviews were much more productive than others, with most of the data being provided by 6 pupils.

The mistakes which were discussed came from written compositions of approximately 120 words describing a set of pictures narrating a story. The task was a normal class exercise. In this particular investigation it was crucial that the learners should comment on their own errors, not on hypothetical sentences. This decision meant that the errors to be discussed were not pre-selected. The original intention of constituting a corpus of mistakes to be analyzed quantitatively was abandoned early in the project as a consequence of the first interviews. However, filtering was achieved through a two-stage correction process (Fig.1). In the first stage all scripts were given back to the pupils, simply indicating where mistakes had been made and pupils were asked to suggest ways of correcting. In this way, a great number of mistakes were eliminated from the process, particularly mistakes in gender and in agreement. Also mistakes which were "non-systematic errors" in Corder's sense (1967: 166) could be eliminated by the pupil's first correction. Pupils who had the most unresolved errors were asked to stay after school for a remedial session which was tape recorded.

Fig. 1: A model of the processing of the mistakes

First step:
- Teacher intervenes and underlines the mistakes.
- Pupil corrects mistakes if able to.

Consequences
1. Errors which are "lapses" are put right.
2. Errors such as gender errors are corrected. ("either ... or": binary choice)
3. Some corrected errors are still wrong.
4. Some errors are partially corrected.
5. Some errors remain uncorrected.

Second step:
- Correction emerges from the teacher/pupil interaction. The interview deals with uncorrected or wrongly corrected errors.

a/ Teacher is perplexed from the start and discovers the path taken by the pupil.

b/ Teacher suspects the nature of the error
- this is confirmed by the interview
- the assumption is disproved by the interview.

c/ Pupil cannot be guided to the correct form. Teacher supplies the form to the learner.

Results

The mistakes which formed the core of the interviews were:

- Mistakes in verb tenses, either the use of an inappropriate tense or incorrect verb forms.
- Mistakes in the use of direct and indirect object pronouns.
- Mistakes related to the use of the apostrophe.

Each of these mistakes had an impact on my awareness of the problem faced by the pupil and had various consequences.

1 Problems with past tenses

Example 1

1a: *ils ont trempé* (They are soaked).
1b: *ils ont étonné* (They are surprised).

Out of context, the correct form of the two sentences above would be, respectively, *ils sont trempés* and *ils sont étonnés*. A possible diagnosis could simply be the misspelling of *ils sont*, confused with *ils ont* because of the liaison of the *s* of *ils* with the vowel *o*. In many instances this diagnosis would be correct. However, the context of the narrative required a past tense; the correct phrases should have been: *ils étaient trempés* (They were soaked) and *ils étaient étonnés* (They were surprised). Talking to the pupil revealed that she wanted to use a past tense and had chosen the perfect tense, probably because it was the most readily available. Therefore, to interpret this mistake primarily as a confusion between the auxiliary verbs *ont* and *sont* is wrong in terms of interlanguage description in this particular instance. The adjectival function of the past participle and the consequent need for the verb *être* has escaped the notice of the pupil as well as the need for an imperfect.

Example 2

il a debout (He is standing).
Presumed correct form: *il est debout*.

Again a frequent diagnosis of this mistake is, as above, a confusion between the auxiliary verbs *a* (i.e. *avoir* - to have) and *est* (i.e *être* - to be), often traced back to a cross-linguistic influence: English learners phonetically associating the letter *a* with the English sound /ei/. But the pupil said that she was trying to make a perfect, hence the use of the auxiliary verb: *a* (has). This was confirmed by her response when I then asked her what the present tense would be, and she said *il debout*. There was no doubt, then, that she felt *debout* was a verb. The context in fact required a past tense, in this case an imperfect tense: *il était debout* (he was standing). There had indeed been an attempt at using a past tense, in this instance a perfect tense, although this was not how I had interpreted the mistake initially since the form used presented itself as a present tense.

Example 3

> *Le château avait construit au 16ième siècle.* (The castle was built in 16th century)
> Correct sentence: *Le château a été construit au 16ième siècle.*

Ten out of the 16 pupils had been unable to say *"il a été construit"* for *"it was built"*. Forms offered varied from a "passé composé" *(il a construit)* to a pluperfect *(il avait construit)*, an imperfect *(il construisait)* and an imperfect passive *(il était construit)*. The teaching difficulty was to show without using any complex grammatical terminology that *was* should not be translated by *était* but *a été*. The only way was to restore the sentence to its active form and then transform it into a passive form:

1. *On a construit ce château au seizième siècle.*
2. *Ce château a été construit au seizième siècle.*

This mistake led me to produce, for my own use not for the pupils, comparative diagrams of the passive voice in French and in English, which clarified from a teaching perspective a very complicated aspect of the two languages (Chambers, 1987: 140-145).

2 Problems with the notion of future events

The same pupil produced two sentences in which she failed to find the appropriate language forms to convey a future intent although the interview revealed that she had some knowledge of the French future tense and its morphology.

Example 4

> *Volonté Simone ton amie aller avec ta famille* (Will your friend Simone go with your family?)
> The target language sentence is: *Est-ce que Simone ira avec ta famille?*

When asked why she had used the word "volonté" (a noun not a verb), the pupil said: "I don't know why I used that, I looked it up in the dictionary. I could not think how to say 'will', so I looked it up". An ill-informed use of the dictionary and certainly an obvious and common phenomenon; but beyond that, what is significant is the lack of awareness of a need for a future form.

The interview shows the slow process involved in bringing about an awareness of the future, as well as the structure of an interrogative sentence. During the interview it is established that the pupil remembers the future of a regular verb (*manger*: to eat) and an irregular one (*venir*: to come), possibly as unanalysed chunks of language taught two years previously.

Example 5

> *Ma parents sont alle de donner moi ....* (My parents are going to give me ....)
> The target language sentence should be: *Mes parents vont me donner ....*

This sentence was produced by the same pupil as Example 4. This, at a literal level, follows the English word order: My parents are going to give me .... The pupil's first correction had produced: *Mes parents aller me donne ....*

During the interview it became apparent that the pupil was groping towards the use of the future tense, that she had some notion of the need to use "an ending" but seemed to think that the verb to be put in the future was "aller". The preceding mistake discussed just prior to this one may also have impinged on her mind. Giving the same name to an English and a French tense clearly acts as a hindrance in this case. The naming assumes that we have equivalence when clearly it is not the case. A bridge is introduced by the phrase "future tense" which is not appropriate to the English language:

I will come = Future tense = *Je viendrai*

This equation hides the dissimilarity which is even greater in the interrogative sentence:

Will you come? = *Est-ce que | tu viendr-as?*

James (1980) draws attention to the danger of being misled by such words: "The labels *tense* or *article* to refer to a certain grammatical category in two different languages should not be taken to mean that we are talking about the same thing."

3 Mistakes in the use of object pronouns

The choice of the appropriate object pronoun and its positioning in the sentence is an area well known to teachers for the difficulty it presents to English pupils

learning French. The use of *lui* instead of *le* is familiar to teachers, and although one may easily demonstrate the mechanism by which a noun is replaced by a pronoun if one uses examples in French, the production process for a pupil starting from English as L1 is complicated.

Two pupils produced mistakes which puzzled me and which had something in common as was revealed in the course of the interview:

Example 6

Pupil A: *Ils regardaient t'il* (They were looking at him)
Correct sentence: *Ils le regardaient*
Pupil B: *Ils ont dit a-t-il* (They told him)
Correct sentence: *Ils lui ont dit*

From a target language viewpoint, both mistakes analyzed grammatically appear extremely peculiar and, encountered separately, one might fail to see a similarity at first. In the course of the interviews I discovered that Pupil A had used *t'* because of its similarity with *to* and that Pupil B thought that *a-t-il* (English: has he) meant *to him*. The absence of the accent on *a* made it more difficult to interpret the mistake. The letter "t" in both mistakes is close to the English "to" or "at" but the cross-linguistic influence is strictly at the spelling level; meaning or function of the preposition do not intervene. In the case of *a-t-il* a whole unanalysed chunk is used.

A third mistake (Pupil C) was less unusual:

Example 7

Les voisins ont lui regarde (The neighbours looked at him)
Correct sentence: *Les voisins l'ont regardé.*

In this case *lui* was used when *le* was required; there was an attempt at placing the pronoun before the verb although that was not successful. It appears that Pupil C is more aware, grammatically, than the other two because, if the verb *to look at* had a French equivalent requiring an indirect object pronoun, the choice of *lui* might appear judicious. However, Pupil C did not seem to be aware of the direct object pronoun *le*; her response was that *him* = *lui*, which of course is true in some contexts.

These three mistakes revealed a common feature, which was the automatic translation of *him* by *il* or *lui*. Pupils said: "Him is lui" or "to him is a-t-il" without any awareness of the grammatical function of the words, although the pronouns had been taught explicitly in the previous year. A systematic study of the acquisition of such pronouns would be required to establish how frequently the assumption *him* = *lui* is made and why.

4 Various mistakes in the use of the apostrophe

Teachers, I think, are familiar with the following examples:

Example 8

Learner language	*qu'est*
Target language	*qui est* (English: which is)

Example 9

Learner language	*m'amie*
Target language	*mon amie* (English: my friend)

Example 10

Learner language	*c'enfant*
Target language	*cet enfant* (English: this child)

In these 3 instances, it appears that a vowel (either *i*, *e* or *a*) has been dropped in front of another vowel. In Example 8, I had assumed that *qu'* stood for *que* and had started explaining that *qui* should have been used; the pupil was adamant that he had intended to use *qui* not *que;* the exchange showed that we were talking at cross purposes. In my mind I had automatically restored *qu'* to *que* and assumed that the pupil was confusing the subject relative pronoun *qui*, with the object relative pronoun *que*. In Example 9, the *m'* is intended by the pupil to stand for *ma* and in Example 10, *c'* stands for *ce*. It seems clear that a rule which requires us to drop the vowels 'e' or 'a' of the definite articles or personal pronouns *le* and *la* in front of another vowel has been extended and generalised. In Examples 9 and 10, the French language adopts different solutions. In Example 9 it requires the use of a masculine possessive adjective in front of a feminine noun and in example 10, there are two forms for the demonstrative adjective *ce* or *cet;* however the forms *m'* and *c'* do exist respectively as personal and demonstrative pronouns. As for Example 8, the elision of the vowel *i* is less predictable since it is not a general

rule; there is elision of the *i* of *si* (English: if) only in front of *il/ils* but not in front of other words with an initial *i*. The misinterpretation of the mistake by the teacher on this occasion suggests an inappropriate explanation and also makes the mistake appear more serious than it is.

The examples of the misuse of the apostrophe show an extension of a rule which was intended for the definite article *le* and *la* (or the direct object pronoun) in front of a vowel. The grammatical function of the word on which the elision of a vowel is carried out is essential. But if pupils are not taught or fail to realise this, then the rules concerning elision of the vowels *e* and *a* appear inconsistent. How can one account for *ce* becoming *cet* in front of a noun starting with a vowel? These examples raise the whole issue of grammatical awareness and how teachers encourage it. On several occasions during the interviews the avoidance of grammatical terminology and explanation meant that teacher and pupil worked on examples and often returned to the sentences learnt at the beginner's stage in an effort to establish a link between the chunks of language taught at an earlier stage and the sentences analyzed. This link seemed to be the crucial process that the learner was unable to build by herself.

Discussion and conclusions

Objections to qualitative studies are often raised by those who argue that one cannot generalise the results. The evidence provided by interviews with 7 pupils does not permit us to say whether the explanations given by the pupils are strictly individual accounts or common to many. However, this does raise doubts about the description of mistakes from a target language viewpoint. For instance, in Example 9 above, to describe in this case *m'* as the personal pronoun *me* when what was intended was the possessive adjective (*ma*) is wrong in interlanguage terms. Familiarity with the target language can be a hindrance in an investigation of learners' language, both for the researcher and the teacher. A researcher collecting mistakes may classify them according to the grammatical categories of the target language although, for some mistakes at least, this procedure will not be appropriate and may hide the different routes taken by individual learners. The comparative stance which is developed through a knowledge of both L1 and L2 is to be avoided if one is trying to apprehend a mistake without preconception; this is particularly difficult for linguists who are conversant with both L1 and L2. For instance, the use of the word "omission" to describe a mistake is a good example of the

misleading effect of a comparative approach. To translate the past tense "I prepared", English pupils frequently write *je préparé* instead of *j'ai préparé*. Teachers describe this as the omission of the auxiliary verb, which is a valid description in terms of the foreign language grammar. However, as there is no morphological differentiation in English between the past participle and the past tense form of regular verbs, the *-é* ending might be generalised by the learner as having the same value as "-ed" in English. So the word "omission" is an example of the dangers of what Bley-Vroman (1983:2) called "the comparative fallacy" and of the effects it can have on the investigation of interlanguage. Rutherford also draws attention to the "opportunities for misanalysis of interlanguage syntax" from the target language perspective (1984:135 and 1987:20). The danger is clearly demonstrated in this study with consequences for the teacher and the researcher, who have to be ready to listen and not anticipate with an explanation which does not match the pupil's misunderstanding.

One of the crucial consequences of interviewing pupils on their work was to alter my approach to mistakes and adopt a more cautious approach in my interpretations of them. The experience certainly was a consciousness-raising exercise for the teacher, although it was originally planned to help the learners with no anticipation of the effect on the teacher. The effectiveness and appropriateness of collective error-correction as a classroom practice is seriously in doubt in many cases. Individual remedial sessions allow a better resolution of the difficulty; this may appear a very time-consuming solution but in reality only few mistakes require an extensive unravelling. The practice of a first correction carried out by the learner on the simple indication that a mistake has been made allows a selection of the problem areas which cannot be decided on *a priori* by the teacher and considerably reduces the variety of mistakes. This process selects the mistakes which need attention.

What value should one attach to a single event which uncovers a mistaken interpretation? Should it be discarded as an exception? How can we assume it is an exception? In terms of perception, the realisation that one has made a false interpretation is an experience which an honest researcher or teacher cannot ignore. The doubt which is thrown on our preconceptions should alter the way we look at mistakes; that in itself becomes a general principle. The experience increases our awareness of the complexity and variety by which learners arrive at some language forms. Having also witnessed the fact that

the same language form can be arrived at by different processes we become less confident in our ability to attempt a classification of errors.

The study was intended to be exploratory. It was limited in its scope. It must also be remembered that the filtering of mistakes produced the selection discussed in the interviews and therefore represents a small proportion of the mistakes produced by the pupils. However, from a pedagogical point of view these are the very mistakes (those which cannot be corrected by the pupil or which puzzle the teacher) which are most problematic, since there is lack of understanding or inability to proceed to a correct form.

The insights gained through the experience at least show how difficult it is for a teacher or a researcher who knows the target language well to see with the eyes of the learner, and yet, without the awareness of the difference in perception, the pedagogical dialogue runs the risk of mutual incomprehension. As for studies of learner language, it seems that learners' accounts could provide some useful insights into their views of language. Studies similar to this one could extend our perception of the learner's language awareness.

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